

OJAI MUSIC FESTIVAL AND EDUCATION

BY CHRISTIANA THOMAS



Marianne is a second grader with Autism Spectrum Disorder. When Marianne started Kindergarten, she had poor impulse control, almost no functional language ability, and her social skills were limited to just being in the same room as the rest of the class. Her teachers struggled to find ways to help her engage in classroom activities. Despite these challenges, however, Marianne would enthusiastically participate in her weekly music classes.



For over 30 years, the [Ojai Music Festival](#) has sponsored the [BRAVO!](#) music education program, which brings professional musicians to the Ojai classrooms for interactive workshops. Three years ago, the **BRAVO!**

program expanded to include weekly *Education Through Music* (ETM) classes for students in the youngest elementary grades. "In talking with the local teachers and music educators, we realized that there was really no targeted music education for the youngest elementary students, and so we worked with local ETM teachers to initiate this new Artist-In-Residence program," said **BRAVO!** coordinator Andy Radford.

The resulting ETM program, which is sponsored in part by the California Arts Council and the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), has become one of the most popular programs in the **BRAVO!** curriculum. ETM prepares students for a lifetime of music-making through experiences that promote the most basic fundamentals of music, especially matching pitch and rhythm, using interactive games.



As the program developed, however, it became clear that the benefits of ETM went far beyond simply preparing students to participate actively in music throughout their school years. Some teachers started remarking on improvements they were seeing in English Language Learners (ELLs), developing language skills more quickly after practicing ETM. Others told the Festival that their students were gaining interpersonal skills. Another remarked on how the program helped her students with pattern recognition. Clearly these music lessons were having a much more global impact on the students they reached.

“One of the benefits of music education is that it has dramatic impacts on children’s auditory processing – a skill that would not otherwise be developed through standard school curricula,” said ETM Executive Director Laura Walter. “ETM helps with language development because before we can take the language apart and work with it in the abstract (sound out letters/words/rhyming), we must first develop an auditory system keen to sound, to its nuances and its structure, so that our ears can differentiate sounds from one another.”



Today, Marianne is playing enthusiastically with her classmates, waiting for her turn, rejoicing in someone else’s turn, engaging in productive dialogue, and singing joyfully and in tune, an

improvement that her teachers and parents say is wonderfully dramatic. And while she will always face challenges related to her autism, ETM has helped her overcome at least a few of them.



After a solid ETM foundation, **BRAVO!** programs reach students in the upper elementary grades with residencies that teach world music. John Zeretzke’s *Flutes Across the World* joins students in Ojai with others in the Philippines through music. Judy Piazza gets students drumming and dancing to folk music in her class *Rhythms and Melodies from around the World*. Julie Tumamait introduces students to Chumash song and dance. And the interactive *Imagine* concert features local students playing mariachi music. In total, the **BRAVO!** program presents more than 450 in-school workshops every year.



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Each summer, all **BRAVO!** students are also invited to attend the Ojai Music Festival free of charge. Widely known for its adventuresome programming and history of innovation, the Ojai Music Festival is the destination of choice for serious new music lovers. This year's Festival, June 9 – 12, features Dawn Upshaw as Music Director with some of her favorite collaborators including graduate students from the Bard College, Australian Chamber Orchestra and Maria Schneider and her 18-piece jazz orchestra.

*Photos by Fred Rothenberg; photos of the Ojai Festival
by Axel Koester*

The [Ojai Music Festival](#) receives funding from the California Arts Council's [Artists in Schools Program](#), which supports residencies in schools, and is managed by Wayne Cook, wcook@cac.ca.gov.

